

Hughes' political gifts: the story

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LOS ANGELES — He is the world's most famous recluse, holed up in the Bahamas or the Desert Inn in Las Vegas or Nicaragua, or, at the moment, a London hotel. He is fanatically secretive, too, about his financial affairs, which are substantial, Howard Robard Hughes being a billionaire.

But now information about Hughes as political financier, about his black-bag men, about his underground rivers of campaign contributions, about the origins of much of that money in his gambling casinos — all of this is gushing to the surface.

The principal founts of the information are two of his former most trusted aides, Robert A. Maheu and Noah Dietrich.

Maheu ran the Hughes Nevada operations, a purported \$300 million diverse enterprise said to be the state's single largest employer. Dietrich was Howard Hughes' chief executive officer for 32 years.

The Maheu information — his deposition in a pending lawsuit, along with other evidence, such as a series of handwritten letters to Maheu apparently from Hughes — deeply involves men who hold public office at this moment: President Nixon; Sen. Hubert H. Humphrey, who in his earlier incarnation as vice president was Nixon's opponent in the 1968 presidential election; numerous legislators on Capitol Hill, and several dozen state and local officials in California and Nevada.

The office of special Watergate prosecutor Archibald Cox in Washington recently gave an aura of immediacy to the Maheu papers by requesting copies of some of them from the U.S. District Court in Los Angeles.

Here are brief highlights; some have eluded public notice, while others have drawn piecemeal attention.

—\$50,000 in checks went to assorted Nixon-Agnew committees about three weeks before the 1968 election. "I want you to go to see Nixon as my special confidential emissary," the letter-writer presumed to be Hughes told Maheu in March 1968.

"I feel there is a really valid possibility of a Republican victory this year," the letter continued. "If that could be realized under our sponsorship and supervision every inch of the way, then we would be ready to follow with Laxalt (then Nevada Gov. Paul Laxalt) as our next candidate."

—\$50,000 in checks went to Humphrey within a few days of the contribution to Nixon. The money was passed through former Nevada Gov. Grant Sawyer, who wrote checks on his

own account to various Humphrey committees.

In the same letter in which he designated Maheu as his "emissary" to Nixon, Hughes named Humphrey as the "one man" who, through President Johnson, could delay a feared underground nuclear test near the Hughes resort in Southern Nevada.

"Why don't we get word to him on a basis of secrecy that is really, really reliable that we will give him immediately full, unlimited support for his campaign to enter the White House if he will just take this one on for us?"

said Hughes — or the man whose signature has not been denied by his lawyers to be his.

"How can we expect to realize our potential as a resort if we are scaring people away with bomb tests?" Hughes said in another letter.

Angry at the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC), which ultimately carried out the tests, called Boxcars, Hughes suggested to Maheu that "somebody should start negotiating with the AEC just like buying a hotel."

—\$50,000 in currency also went to Humphrey during the 1968 campaign. Maheu testified that he delivered the cash to the vice president in the candidate's limousine outside Los Angeles' Century Plaza Hotel, where Humphrey had just delivered a campaign speech.

—\$100,000 in currency "earmarked" for President Nixon was delivered in two equal installments in 1969 and 1970 to Charles G. (Bebe) Rebozo, one of Nixon's closest friends. Maheu said Rebozo had been "chosen by Mr. Nixon" to receive the cash.

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The first delivery was made in Key Biscayne by Richard G. Danner, who runs the Sands Hotel, a Hughes-owned gambling casino on the Las Vegas Strip. Danner also made the delivery in 1970 — so long after the presidential election that Maheu admitted to concern about possible "eventual embarrassment."

Danner, who is expected to fill out the story in a deposition due to be filed this week, made three trips to Washington in 1970 to see Attorney General John N. Mitchell. His mission was "to convey a request of Mr. Hughes," Maheu said.

The request was that Mitchell overrule the Justice Department's antitrust division, which was trying to prevent Hughes from acquiring the Dunes casino-hotel on the Las Vegas Strip.

Hughes already was a dominant power on the

Strip, where he owned the Silver Slipper casino and five casino-hotels, the Desert Inn (where he lived a secluded life in the ninth-floor penthouse), and the Castaways, Frontier, Landmark and Sands hotels. In addition, he had other major interests in Nevada.

Maheu said he told Thomas G. Bell, a Hughes lawyer in Las Vegas who was a conduit for political cash in the state, "that certain political obligations had to be met as the result" of one of Danner's trips to see Mitchell.

Columnist Jack Anderson said on Tuesday that Danner has told investigators for the Senate Watergate committee that Mitchell, claimed by Danner to have been unaware of the \$100,000 given to Rebozo, cleared the Dunes acquisition in August or September of 1970.

This was several weeks after Danner had delivered the second \$50,000 — in \$100 bills — to Rebozo in San Clemente. However, the Dunes acquisition fell through.

—\$25,000 in cash was delivered by Maheu in 1968 by Lawrence E. O'Brien, then chairman of the Democratic National Committee, soon after the burial of Sen. Robert F. Kennedy. Maheu said the money had been pledged to Kennedy's campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination.

Because the Kennedy campaign was left

with unpaid bills, "I felt it would be the proper thing to meet our commitment," Maheu said. He went to O'Brien, he said, "pursuant to instruction of Pierre Salinger," a Kennedy family friend.

—Richard A. Ellis, a certified public accountant retained by Maheu, confirmed under oath that the total of \$125,000 in cash given to Nix-

on, Humphrey and Kennedy in 1968 and 1969 flowed from Hughes' "personal account" in Los Angeles through Maheu's unincorporated investigative and public relations firm, Robert A. Maheu Associates.

Hughes' secretary, Nadine Henley, administered the "personal account," also identified as "Hughes Productions."